

# Editorial: Science and Art

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*By Anne Covell Newton*

Previously in this space we have noted that the purpose of this journal is to provide an opportunity for teachers in all corners of the globe to share with colleagues helpful ideas about the *art* of teaching English as a foreign language.

What, then, about the *science* of language teaching--of linguistics, language acquisition, and the relevant disciplines that inform our pedagogy. Are we to ignore this important element of our work?

By no means. A language teacher should have a solid knowledge of the contributing disciplines--a knowledge of both current and past thinking, theory, and research pertinent to the field--a knowledge supplied partly by this journal, and more fully through other means: books, periodicals, and courses.

To be truly scientific, however, we should add a necessary caution--one that pertains to the "science" of language teaching as to the science of cosmology. From Copernicus to Einstein and beyond, scientific breakthroughs have come from a combination of (1) a thorough knowledge of past and present scientific thinking and (2) a willingness to "think the unthinkable"--or, rather, the previously *unthought*--always with the recognition that the most convincingly established theory may prove to be flawed, and therefore discredited. This is how science advances, however painful the process may seem at times to the exponents of a popular theory.

Yet another caution stems from the fairly recent recognition by physicists that the very doing of a piece of research may, in ways and to a degree previously unrealized, introduce a variable significant enough to invalidate the results of the research, however rigorous and "correct" the methodology and statistical analysis.

Is this a rationale for ignorance of scientific theory and research on the part of the teacher? Certainly not. But it is a plea for an open mind, as well as a proper perspective on the science and art of our work.

Paradoxically (as it would seem), such musings on the forward movement of science tend to suggest not only a kind of liberalism-even radicalism- toward accepted dogma but a certain degree of conservatism as well. In physics, Newton's laws, largely discredited in a cosmic sense by twentieth-century advances in science, nevertheless continue to be relevant and useful in many ordinary circumstances of life; by the same token, in our field, some activities related to now outmoded theories of language teaching may still have a certain usefulness, within a principled eclecticism, in furthering the learner's mastery of the language. This implies interesting and important choices on the part of the teacher, and indicates the necessary interplay of science and art in what we do.